

# THE PERSIANS

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

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## INTRODUCTION TO *THE PERSIANS*

*The Persians* was produced at Athens in 472 B.C., eight years after the naval battle at Salamis, which the play celebrates. We learn from its Argument that it was modeled on a lost play, *The Phoenissae* of Phrynichus, but that Phrynichus had announced at once the defeat of Xerxes, whereas Aeschylus presents a chorus of old men who voice their hopes and fears, by themselves and with Xerxes' mother, before the news of the defeat comes. This delay of course makes the Persians' defeat so much the greater, as it heightens the magnificence of their doom. The Queen then invokes her dead husband Darius (at whose tomb the scene is laid), who had led an unsuccessful expedition against Greece ten years before. He consoles the Queen and Chorus but predicts another disaster at Plataea (479 B.C.). Soon afterward, Xerxes, his garments torn, returns alone, and he and the Chorus conclude the play with a lament.

*The Persians* is unique in several ways. It is the only extant Greek tragedy that is not mythical but based on a contemporary event. The daring of such a presentation is easy to imagine. To show sympathetically, *sine ira et studio*, on the stage at Athens the defeat of her deadliest enemy testifies to the humanity of Aeschylus and the Athenians. No other tragedian we know of, of any country at any time, has ever dared to go so far in sympathizing with his country's foe. It is the more remarkable when we consider that Aeschylus himself and almost all of his audience fought at Salamis or Plataea and that the war, moreover, was between freedom and slavery. Here are the Persians, having started an unjust war and suffering a deserved defeat, presented not as criminals but rather as great and noble, dying deaths that are to be as much pitied as the deaths of Athenians. To praise the Athenians at Athens, Socrates remarks, or the Spartans at Sparta is not very difficult; but to praise the Atheni-

ans at Sparta or the Spartans at Athens demands great rhetorical skill; and for Aeschylus to praise before their conquerors the Persians, the enemies of all Greece, is without precedent and without imitation.

Although *The Persians* is historical in substance, Aeschylus deliberately introduced what the entire audience must have known to be false. He makes up Persian names, very few of which correspond to the generals we know to have been at the battle; his figures for the size of Xerxes' fleet at Salamis are greatly exaggerated; the Persians call upon Greek gods, though everyone knew that their gods were different; the Queen performs a Greek sacrifice at the tomb of Darius; neither the Chorus (except once) nor Darius mention the Persians' defeat at Marathon only ten years before; and perhaps what is most striking, Aeschylus invokes from the past Darius, so that his presence, being both ghostly and real, might transform an ugly reality into a poetic past. By thus changing many details of the real story, Aeschylus removes the Persian War to the realm of myth, where the memory of his audience is prevented from confirming or denying at every point the truth of what he says.

The contemporary is almost perforce untragic, for excessive attention to detail (and the contemporary must be shown accurately) stifles poetry and does not allow the poet to alter his subject; whereas tragedy, being abstracted from the present, is given a free rein, unhampered by what the audience knows to be so, to mold the story to its own demands. Just as verse is an abstraction from prose, reducing it to order, so tragedy abstracts from history and brings necessity out of chance.

If Aeschylus addressed his play specifically to his Athenian countrymen, how can he also speak to us, who are not Athenians, across the reach of time? This certainly must be said. The Persian War was not merely one parochial war among others, in which the issues of right and wrong are ambiguous, as was the case in the Peloponnesian War. The Persian War was a war of liberty versus despotism, and all free men of all times in reading *The Persians* will identify their cause with the cause of the Greeks. In this sense, then, we are

Athenians ourselves, and thus our sympathies and understanding become sufficiently enlarged to comprehend the merits of our foes.

Since the doom of the Persians is impressed upon us by the regular meters of the chorus, which convey even to our ears the effect of marching or lament, I have tried, so far as English would allow, to reproduce them in such a way that the reader can "hear" the mood of each song. I hope that, after a little practice on his part, the rhythm will become clear.

## THE PERSIANS

CHARACTERS

*Chorus of Persian elders*

*Queen of Persia, wife of Darius,  
mother of Xerxes*

*Persian Herald*

*Ghost of Darius*

*Xerxes*

## THE PERSIANS

SCENE: *In the background the palace of Xerxes at Sousa, in the center foreground the tomb of Darius.*

### Chorus

Of the Persians gone  
To the land of Greece  
Here are the trusted:  
As protectors of treasure  
And of golden thrones  
We were chosen by Xerxes—  
Emperor and king,  
Son of Darius—  
In accord with age  
Guards of the country.

For the king's return  
With his troops of gold  
Doom is the omen  
In my heart convulsed,  
As it whines for its master;  
For all Asia is gone:  
To the city of Persians  
Neither a herald nor horseman returns.

10

And some Agbatana  
And some Sousa and  
Ancient Kissa leaving,  
Both on horse and on ship  
And on foot displayed  
Legions of battle:  
Artaphrenes, Megabates,  
Astaspes, Amistres,

20

Leaders of Persians, kings,  
Who are slaves of the greatest of kings,  
Guarding the legions they rush,  
And as bowman and knight,  
With their temper resolved,  
Fearful in aspect,  
Dreadful in battle.

And exultant in horses  
Artembares, Masistres,  
The brave archer Imaeus,  
And Pharandakas,  
And the driver of horses  
Sousthenes.

30

And others were sent  
By the flourishing Nile:  
Egyptian-born Sousiscanes,  
Pegastagon, great Arsames  
Ruler of sacred Memphis;  
And Ariomardus  
Governing ancient Thebes;  
And who dwelling by marshes  
Are rowers of ships,  
Skilful and countless.

40

And the Lydians soft  
Who inhabit the coast  
Follow commanders and kings:  
Metrogathes and brave Arkteus,  
And golden Sardis send  
Many charioteers,  
Horses by threes and by fours,  
Fearful the sight to behold.

And the neighbors of Tmolus—  
They threaten to yoke



In servitude Hellas;  
 And the Mysian lancers,  
 Tharybis, Mardon,  
 Anvils of battle.  
 And golden Babylon  
 Pours forth her crowds—  
 Borne by their ships—  
 Who in drawing the bow  
 Rely on their boldness.  
 And the tribes from all Asia  
 Who carry the sword  
 Follow beneath the  
 Awesome parade of their king.

Thus of the Persian land  
 Of her men the flower is gone,  
 Nursed by the earth, and all Asia  
 Laments, consumed by desire;  
 And parents and wives  
 Counting the days  
 Tremble at lengthening time.

The destroyer of cities now,  
 That kingly army, has gone  
 Over the strait to the land  
 On linen-bound pontoons—  
 Tightly was clamped the way—  
 Helle of Athamas crossing,  
 Yoking the neck of the sea.—

And the furious leader the herd  
 Of populous Asia he drives,  
 Wonderful over the earth,  
 And admirals stern and rough  
 Marshals of men he trusts:  
 Gold his descent from Perseus,  
 He is the equal of god.=

In his eyes lazuli flashing  
Like a snake's murderous glances,  
With his mariners, warriors, many,  
And his Syrian chariot driving,  
Hard on the glorious spearmen  
The archer Ares he leads. —

To the great torrent of heroes  
There is none worthily equal,  
Who resist, by defenses securèd,  
The unconquerable billows of ocean:  
Persians are never defeated,  
The people tempered and brave. =

90

For divine fate has prevailed since  
It enjoined Persians to wage wars,  
Which destroy towers and ramparts,  
And the glad tumult of horsemen,  
And cities overthrown. —

102

When the vast ocean was foaming,  
By the winds boisterous whitened,  
Then they learned, trusting to cables  
And to pontoons which convey men,  
To scan the sacred sea. =

113

Deceitful deception of god—  
What mortal man shall avoid it?  
With nimbleness, deftness, and speed,  
Whose leaping foot shall escape it?  
Benign and coaxing at first  
It leads us astray into nets which  
No mortal is able to slip,  
Whose doom we never can flee.

93

101

Thus sable-clad my heart is torn,  
Fearful for those Persian arms,

Lest the city hear, alas!

That reft of men is Sousa;—

And lest the city Kissa shall,  
When the crowds of women cry,

Sing antiphonal, alas!

120

And rend their garb of mourning.=

All the horse and infantry  
Like a swarm of bees have gone  
With the captain of the host,  
Who joined the headlands of either land,  
Crossing the yoke of the sea.—

130

Beds with longing fill with tears,  
Persian wives in softness weep;  
Each her armèd furious lord  
Dismissed with gentle love and grief,  
Left all alone in the yoke.=

But come, Persians,  
Let us in this ancient palace sit,  
And deep and wisely found our thoughts:  
How does King Xerxes fare, Darius' son,  
How fare his people? Has arrows' hail  
Or strength of spear conquered?

140

But lo! she comes,  
A light whose splendor equals eyes of gods,  
The mother of our king, I kneel.  
Now all must address and salute her.

150

*(Enter Queen.)*

O most majestic Queen of Persians  
In ample folds adorned,  
Hail, agèd Xerxes' mother,  
Consort of Darius, hail!  
Mistress of the god of Persians,  
Mother of a god thou art,

Unless the fortune of their arms  
Now at last has altered.

*Queen*

Leaving my gold-clad palace, marriage-  
Chamber of Darius, and my own, 160  
His queen I'm come. Care quite grates my heart;  
I fear, my friends, though not fearful for myself,  
Lest great wealth's gallop trip prosperity—  
Exalted by Darius and some god—  
In its own dust. But, unexpectedly,  
That dread has doubled: sums of cowardly  
Wealth do court contempt, and indigence  
Quenches ambition's flame, even if there's strength.  
Though wealth we have unstinted; yet fear  
Is for mine eye, Xerxes, whose presence here  
I count the palace-eye. So things stand thus. 170  
Advise my reason, Persians, old sureties:  
All my gains with your counsel lie.

*Chorus*

O Queen of Persia, be assured that never  
Twice hast thou to tell us word or deed,  
Which our willing strength can guide; for we  
Are loyal, whom thou dost call thy counselors.

*Queen*

With frequent, constant, and nocturnal dreams  
I have lived, as soon as my son, gathering  
His host had gone, his will to pillage Greece;  
But never a more vivid presence came  
Than yesternight's. 180  
Two women as an apparition came,  
One in Persian robes instructed well,  
The other Doric, both in splendor dressed,  
Who grand and most magnificent excelled  
Us now, their beauty unrepached, spotless;

Sisters they, who casting for their father's land,  
 She Greece received, she Asia, where to dwell.  
 Then strife arose between them, or so I dreamed;  
 And my son, observing this, tries to check 190  
 And soothe them; he yokes them to a chariot,  
 Bridles their necks: and one, so arrayed, towers  
 Proud, her mouth obedient to reins;  
 But the other stamps, annoyed, and rends apart  
 Her trappings in her hands; unbridled, seizes  
 The car and snaps its yoke in two;  
 My son falls, and his father, pitying,  
 Stands by his side, but at whose sight Xerxes  
 Tears his robes. Thus in the night these visions  
 Dreamed: but when, arisen, I touched the springs' 200  
 Fair-flowing waters, approached the altar, wishing  
 To offer sacrifice religiously  
 To guardian deities, whose rites these are,  
 Then to Phoebus' hearth I saw an eagle fleeing:  
 Dumb in dread I stood: a falcon swooped  
 Upon him, its wings in flight, its claws plucked  
 At his head: he did no more than cower, hare-like.  
 Those were my terrors to see, and yours to hear. 210  
 My son, should he succeed, would be admired;  
 But if he fails, Persia cannot hold him  
 To account. Whichever comes, safe returned, sovereign  
 He shall rule.

*Chorus*

Queen mother, excessive fear  
 Or confidence we do not wish to give thee.  
 If thy dreams were ominous, approach  
 The gods with supplications; pray that these  
 Be unfulfilled, and blessings be fulfilled  
 For thee, thy son, thy city, and thy friends.  
 Next thou must libations pour to Earth

And dead; and beg Darius, of whom thou didst dream, 220  
 Send thee those blessings from the nether world  
 To light, for thee and for thy son; and hide  
 In darkness evils contrary, retained  
 Within the earth. Propitious be thy prayers.  
 We, prophetic in our spirit, kindly  
 Counsel thee: all will prosper.

*Queen*

Ah, loyally have answered the first expounders  
 Of my dreams. May these blessings ripen!  
 And all, as you enjoin, I'll sacrifice  
 To nether gods and friends, as soon as I  
 Return. But one thing more I wish to know: 230  
 My friends, where is Athens said to be?

*Chorus*

Far toward the dying flames of sun.

*Queen*

Yet still my son lusts to track it down?

*Chorus*

Then all Hellas would be subject to the king.

*Queen*

So rich in numbers are they?

*Chorus*

So great a host  
 As dealt to Persians many woes.

*Queen*

Are bow-plucked shafts their armament?

*Chorus*

Pikes wielded-close and shielded panoplies.

*Queen*

What else besides? Have they sufficing wealth? 240

*Chorus*

Their earth is veined with silver treasures.

*Queen*

Who commands them? Who is shepherd of their host?

*Chorus*

They are slaves to none, nor are they subject.

*Queen*

But how could they withstand a foreign foe?

*Chorus*

Enough to vanquish Darius' noble host.

*Queen*

We mothers dread to calculate—

*Chorus*

But soon thou'lt know all: a Persian runner comes,  
Bearing some fresh report of weal or woe.

(*Enter Herald.*)

*Herald*

O cities of Asia, O Persian land,  
And wealth's great anchorage!  
How at a single stroke prosperity's  
Corrupted, and the flower of Persia falls,  
And is gone. Alas! the first herald of woe,  
He must disclose entire what befell:  
Persians, all the barbarian host is gone.

250

*Chorus*

O woe! woeful evil,  
Novel and hostile.  
Alas! Persians weep  
Hearing this woe,—

*Herald*

How all has been destroyed, and I behold  
The unexpected light of my return.

260

*Chorus*

Oh long seems our aged  
Life to us elders,

Alas! hearing woe  
Unexpected. =

*Herald*

And since I was witness, deaf to rumor's tales,  
I can indicate what sorrows came.

*Chorus*

Woe upon woe, in vain  
The crowd of arrows, massed,  
Came on the hostile land. —

270

*Herald*

The lifeless rotting corpses glut the shore,  
And adjacent fields of Salamis.

*Chorus*

Woe upon woe, of friends  
The sea-dyed corpses whirl  
Vagrant on craggèd shores. =

*Herald*

The bow protected none, but all the host,  
Defeated in the naval charge, was lost.

*Chorus*

Raise a mournful, doleful cry  
For Persians wretched:  
All they made all woe.  
Alas! the host destroyed. —

280

*Herald*

O most hateful name of Salamis!  
O woe! how I mourn recalling Athens.

*Chorus*

Athens hateful to her foes.  
Recall how many  
Persians widowed vain,  
And mothers losing sons. =



*Queen*

Long am I silent, alas! struck down  
By disasters exceeding speech and question.  
Yet men perforce god-sent misfortunes must  
Endure. Speak, disclose entire what  
Befell, quietly, though you grieve.  
Who did not die? For whom of the captains  
Shall we lament? Whose sceptered death drained his ranks  
Manless?

290

*Herald*

Xerxes lives to behold the light, but—

*Queen*

O for my palace a greater light,  
And after blackest night a whiter day.

300

*Herald*

Artembares, captain of ten thousand  
Horse, was dashed against Silenia's  
Rugged shore; and satrap Dadakes,  
Spear-struck, did lightly tumble from his ship;  
And native-born Tenagon, the bravest  
Bactrian, still haunts sea-buffeted  
Ajax' isle; and Lilaëus, Arsames,  
And Argestes, conquered near the island  
Where doves do thrive, beat a stubborn coast;  
And neighbors of Egyptian Nile-waters,  
Adeues, Arkteus, and, third, shielded  
Pharnouchus, from a single ship  
Were drowned; and Matallus, satrap of Chrysa,  
Dying, leader of a thousand horse,  
Changed to richest red his thickset flowing  
Beard, and dipped his skin in crimson dyes;  
And Magian Arabus and Bactrian  
Artabes, all aliens in a savage  
Country, perished; Amphistreus, who wielded

310

The much-belaboring spear, and Amistris,  
 Brave Ariomardus, all made Sardis weep;  
 And Mysian Seisames, Tharybis,  
 Commander of five times fifty ships,  
 His race Lyrnaean, fair to look upon  
 (His fortune was not), dead he lies;  
 And the leader of Cilicians single-handed  
 Taxed the enemy with toil, and nobly  
 Died. So many of the rulers I  
 Recall, but of the many woes, report  
 But few. 320 330

*Queen*

Alas! I hear the greatest  
 Of misfortunes, shame of Persians, and shrill  
 Lament. But tell me, returning to your tale,  
 What was the number of the Grecian ships,  
 That thought themselves a match for Persian  
 Arms in naval combat?

*Herald*

Had numbers counted,  
 The barbarian warships surely would have won;  
 The Greeks but numbered thirty tens, and ten 340  
 Apart from these a chosen squadron formed;  
 But Xerxes, and this I know full well, a thousand  
 Led; and seven and two hundred ranked  
 As queens in swiftness. The count stood so.  
 Seemed we unequal? Some deity destroyed  
 Our host, who weighing down the balance swung  
 The beam of fortune. The gods saved the city  
 Of the goddess.

*Queen*

What? Athens still  
 Stands unsacked?

*Herald*

As long as there are men

The city stands.

*Queen*

What was the beginning

350

Of disaster? Tell me. Who began?

The Greeks? My son—exultant in his numbers?

*Herald*

Either an avenger or a wicked

God, my Lady (whence it came I know not),

Began the whole disaster. From Athenian

Ranks a Greek approached, addressing Xerxes

Thus: "When the gloom of blackest night

Will fall, the Greeks will not remain, but leap

To rowing-bench, and each by secret course

Will save his life." And he your son, upon

360

His hearing this, in ignorance of Greek

Guile and the jealousy of gods,

Harangued his captains publicly: "As soon

As sunlit rays no longer burn the earth,

And darkness sweeps the quarters of the sky,

Rank the swarm of ships in three flotillas,

Guard they the entrances, the straits sea-pound,

And girdle others round Ajax' isle;

But if the Greeks escape their evil doom,

370

Contriving secret flight, all your heads

Will roll. I warrant it." So he spoke

In humored pride: of the god-given future

Nothing he knew. And, having supped, they set

Themselves in order, each heart obedient;

And sailors bound a thong about each oar.

When the glare of sunlight died, and night

Came on, every man was at his oar,

Every man at arms who knew them.

Rank encouraged rank, and long-boats sailed 380  
 To stations each had been assigned.  
 All night the captains kept the fleet awake;  
 And night ran on. No Grecian army set  
 Secret sail: but when the steeds of day,  
 White and luminous, began to cross  
 The sky, a song-like, happy tumult sounded  
 From the Greeks, and island rocks returned 390  
 The high-pitched echo. Fear fell among us,  
 Deceived in hope; for they (and not as if to flee)  
 A solemn paean chanted, and to battle  
 Rushed with fervent boldness: trumpets flared,  
 Putting every Greek aflame. At once  
 Concordant strokes of oars in dissonance  
 Slapped the waters' depths: soon we saw  
 Them all: first the right wing led in order,  
 Next advanced the whole armada; 400  
 A great concerted cry we heard: "O Greek  
 Sons, advance! Free your fathers' land,  
 Free your sons, your wives, the sanctuaries  
 Of paternal gods, the sepulchers  
 Of ancestors. Now the contest's drawn:  
 All is at stake!" And babel Persian tongues  
 Rose to meet it: no longer would the action  
 Loiter. Warships struck their brazen beaks  
 Together: a Grecian man-of-war began  
 The charge, a Phoenician ornamented stern 410  
 Was smashed; another drove against another.  
 First the floods of Persians held the line,  
 But when the narrows choked them, and rescue hopeless,  
 Smitten by prows, their bronze jaws gaping,  
 Shattered entire was our fleet of oars.  
 The Grecian warships, calculating, dashed  
 Round, and encircled us; ships showed their belly:  
 No longer could we see the water, charged

With ships' wrecks and men's blood. 420  
 Corpses glutted beaches and the rocks.  
 Every warship urged its own anarchic  
 Rout; and all who survived that expedition,  
 Like mackerel or some catch of fish,  
 Were stunned and slaughtered, boned with broken oars  
 And splintered wrecks: lamentations, cries  
 Possessed the open sea, until the black  
 Eye of evening, closing, hushed them. The sum  
 Of troubles, even if I should rehearse them  
 For ten days, I could not exhaust. Rest 430  
 Content: never in a single day  
 So great a number died.

*Queen*

Alas! a sea of troubles breaks in waves  
 On the Persians and barbarian tribes.

*Herald*

But what we've told would scarcely balance woes  
 Untold: misfortune came upon them, which  
 Swung the beam to weigh them double these.

*Queen*

But what greater hatred could fortune show?  
 What misfortune came upon the soldiers,  
 Swinging the beam of troubles to greater woes? 440

*Herald*

All the Persians, who were in nature's prime,  
 Excellent in soul, and nobly bred to grandeur,  
 Always first in trust, met their death  
 In infamy, dishonor, and in ugliness.

*Queen*

Oh, wretched am I, alas! What doom  
 Destroyed them?

*Herald*

There is an island fronting Salamis,

Small, scarce an anchorage for ships,  
 Where the dancer Pan rejoices on the shore;  
 Whither Xerxes sent those men to kill 450  
 The shipwrecked enemies who sought the island  
 As a refuge (easily, he thought,  
 The Grecian arms would be subdued);  
 He also bid them rescue friends. He conned  
 The future ill. For when a god gave Greeks  
 The glory, that very day, fenced in bronze,  
 They leaped ashore, and drew the circle tight  
 At every point: mewed up, we could not turn.  
 Many rattled to the ground, whom stones  
 Had felled, and arrows, shot by bowstring, 460  
 Others killed; and in a final rush,  
 The end: they hacked, mangled their wretched limbs,  
 Until the life of all was gone.  
 Xerxes mourned, beholding the lowest depths  
 Of woe; who, seated on a height that near  
 The sea commanded all his host, his robes  
 Destroying (and his lamentations shrill),  
 Dispatched his regiments on land: they fled 470  
 Orderless. Now you may lament their fate,  
 Added to the others' summed before.

*Queen*

O hateful deity! how the Persians  
 You deceived! Bitter was the vengeance  
 Which my son at famous Athens found:  
 She could not sate her appetite with those  
 Whom Marathon had made the Persians lose.  
 For these my son, exacting as requital  
 Punishment (or so he thought)  
 Called on himself so numerous  
 A train of woes. Tell me, what ships escaped?  
 Where are they now? Can you clearly tell?

*Herald*

Who captained the remaining ships set sail 480  
 Before the wind, fleeing in disorder;  
 But the army perished in Boeotia: some,  
 In want of precious water, were racked with thirst,  
 And some, gasping emptily on air,  
 Crossed to Phocis, Locria, the Malian  
 Gulf, where Spercheian waters kindly drench  
 The plain; and thence Achaea and Thessaly  
 Received us, wanting: there most died 490  
 In hunger and in thirst: both we felt.  
 To Magnesia and Macedonia we came,  
 The River Axius, the reedy marsh  
 Of Bolba, the mountain Pangaeon,  
 And Thrace. There in the night a god  
 Roused winter out of season: all, who had  
 Believed the gods were naught, sang their chants,  
 To earth and sky obeisance made.  
 When we ceased invoking gods, we tried 500  
 Waters that had turned to ice:  
 Whoever started before Apollo's rays  
 Spread and scattered in the sky, he  
 Was saved. Soon the brilliant orb of sun,  
 Its rays aflame, melts the river's midst:  
 One falls upon the next: happy he whose life  
 Was first cut short! The rest did make their way 510  
 But painfully through Thrace: not many fled  
 To hearth and home. Thus the city of Persians  
 May lament, regretting the loss of youth.  
 Truthful I have been, but omit many  
 Of the woes a god has hurled against  
 The Persians.

*(Exit Herald.)*

*Chorus*

O toilsome deity! how heavily  
You leaped upon all Persia!

*Queen*

Alas! woe is me, the host destroyed.  
O bright night's spectacle of dreams,  
How clearly you foresaw my woe,  
And you, my counselors, how poorly judged. 520  
But yet, as you counseled thus,  
First to the gods I'll offer prayer; and then  
To Earth and dead I'll come to offer gifts,  
A sacrificial cake. I know I pray  
For what is done and gone, but a brighter  
Fortune, in time to come, may there be.  
And you, worthy of trust, exchange worthy counsel;  
My son, should he return before my own  
Return, comfort and escort him home:  
I fear to woes he'll add more woe. 530

*(Exit Queen.)*

*Chorus*

O! royal Zeus destroyed  
The multitudinous, proud  
Host of the Persian men,  
And the cities of Sousa  
And of Agbatana  
Concealed in the darkness of grief.

Many with delicate hands  
Rending their veils,  
Drenching their breasts,  
Swollen with tears, 540  
Sharing their woe,  
Ladies of Persia  
Softly are weeping,  
Desiring each



Him to behold  
Wedded but lately,  
Couches forsaking,  
Soft as their coverlets  
(Youth was voluptuous),  
Their sorrows, insatiate woe.  
And I the paean's song recite,  
Doom of the gone,  
Woe upon woe.

Now all Asia  
Desolate, void,  
Sighs lament:  
Xerxes led, 550  
Alas,  
Xerxes lost,  
O woe,  
Xerxes heedless all discharged  
With ocean argosies.  
Why was Darius so long without harm,  
Archery's captain of citizens,  
Loved Sousa's lord?—

Armies, navies  
Lazuli-eyed,  
Linen-winged 560  
Warships led, .  
O woe,  
Warships rammed destructively  
By Grecian arms.  
Scarcely escaped was the leader alone  
(So we have heard) in the Thracian  
Plains, bitter ways.=

They of the first death,  
Alas,

Left by necessity,  
 Woe,  
 Round by Kychraean shores, 570  
 Oh,  
 Moan in your anguish,  
 Cry to the heavens your grief,  
 Oh,  
 Wail long-weeping  
 Mournful cries.—

Torn in the sea-swirl,  
 Alas,  
 Mangled by voiceless,  
 Woe,  
 Fish of the unstained sea.  
 Oh,  
 Houses deprived grieve,  
 Sonless, to heavens their grief, 580  
 Oh,  
 Elders mourning,  
 Hear all woe. =

They throughout the Asian land  
 No longer Persian laws obey,  
 No longer lordly tribute yield,  
 Exacted by necessity;  
 Nor suffer rule as suppliants,  
 To earth obeisance never make:  
 Lost is the kingly power. — 590

Nay, no longer is the tongue  
 Imprisoned kept, but loose are men,  
 When loose the yoke of power's bound,  
 To bawl their liberty.  
 But Ajax' isle, spilled with blood  
 Its earth, and washed round by sea,  
 Holds the remains of Persia. =

(Enter Queen.)

Queen

My friends, whoever's wise in ways of evil  
 Knows how, when a flood of evil comes,  
 Everything we grow to fear; but when 600  
 A god our voyage gladdens, we believe  
 Always that fortune's never-changing wind  
 Will blow. As my eyes behold all things  
 As fearful visitations of the gods,  
 So my ears already ring with cureless songs:  
 Thus consternation terrifies my sense.  
 Therefore I departed from the palaces,  
 Alone returning, unaccompanied  
 By chariots, by pomp and ceremony.  
 To the father of my son I bring  
 Propitious offerings, libations 610  
 For the dead: a milk-sweet draught of sacred kine  
 Unblemished; and resplendent liquors of the honey-  
 Working bee, with liquid droplets of a maiden  
 Stream are mingled; and this elixir  
 Of an antique vine, whose mother is  
 The wild fields; and golden-green the fruit  
 Of fragrant olive trees, always flourishing  
 Their leafy age; and plaited flowers, children  
 Of the fecund earth. My friends, recite  
 Your chants and threnodies; recall  
 Darius, daemon over these libations 620  
 To the dead, sepulchral honors, which  
 I lavish on the nether gods.

Chorus

O Queen of the Persians,  
 To the dark chambers  
 Libations pour;  
 While, kindness imploring  
 Of the gods, the conductors,

We offer prayer:

Ye sacred divinities,

Earth and King Hermes,

630

Conduct him to light

Up from the dead,

Who alone of all mortals,

A remedy knowing,

May show us the end.

Hearest thou, blessèd king

Equal to god,

As I proclaim now

Chantings unpleasant

Barbarous mournful

Clear and diverse?

Miserable sorrows

I shall cry out.

Below dost thou hearken?—

Earth and the other gods

640

Leaders of dead,

Glorious demon

Him let arise thence,

God of the Persians

Sousa his mother;

Send up the man whom

Never surpassed

The Persian land buried. =

Loved is the man, loved his tomb

Hiding his loving ways.

Aedoneus conductor,

Would that Aedoneus send

650

Lord Darius alone:—

Never by war wasted his men,

Never infatuate,

Called a god in wisdom,  
God in wisdom he was,  
Ruled his people well. =

Padshah, ancient Padshah,  
Appear on the height of thy tomb,  
Raise thy slipper saffron-dyed, 660  
Flash the lappets of thy crown:  
Father Darius, Oh hither come, woe. —

Hear the recent sorrows,  
O master of masters appear.  
Stygian gloom doth flit about;  
All the youth hath perished now. 670  
Father Darius, Oh hither come, woe. =

Oh, alas, Oh!  
O much-lamented by his friends in death:  
The ships with triple banks of oars are gone. 680

*(The Ghost of Darius rises.)*

*Darius*

O faithful followers, companions  
Of my youth! O Persian counselors!  
What burden's burdening the city, which  
In lamentation moans, and makes the plains  
Tremble? And terrified I saw my wife  
Beside my tomb, and graciously received  
Her offerings; and you lamented, standing  
Near my tomb, with cries of resurrection  
Calling piteously. Ascent is not easy.  
The chthonic deities more readily  
Receive than give; but I, a potentate 690  
Among them, came: be quick, that I be un-  
Reproached for being late. What recent woe  
Upon the Persians weighs?

*Chorus*

I'm shamed to behold thee,  
I'm shamed to address thee,  
Who was anciently feared.—

*Darius*

Since I have risen obeying  
Lamentations, lengthen not  
Your tale, but speak succinctly,  
Recounting all. Lay aside your  
Reverence toward me.

*Chorus*

I tremble to please thee,  
I tremble to tell thee  
What is loth to be told.=

700

*Darius*

As an ancient fear obstructs your sense,  
You, agèd consort of my marriage,  
Noble Queen, cease your weeping; tell me  
Clearly: many woes arise by sea, many  
Come by land, the longer life is racked.

*Queen*

O King, exceeding mortal happiness  
By happy fate! How, as long as you beheld  
The eyes of sun, you spent, how envied! a blessed  
Life like god's; and now I envy you  
Your dying, ere you saw this depth of woe.  
Everything, Darius, you will hear  
Succinctly: Persia is destroyed.

710

*Darius*

How? A lightning-bolt of hunger? Civil  
Strife within the city?

*Queen*

No, but all  
The host's destroyed at Athens.

*Darius*

Who among  
My sons was general? Tell me.

*Queen*

Furious Xerxes, who drained the plain manless.

*Darius*

By foot or warship was his vain attempt?

*Queen*

By both: a double front of doubled hosts.

720

*Darius*

But how did so great an army cross the strait?

*Queen*

Devices, yoking Helle's strait, a path  
Afforded.

*Darius*

He accomplished this? To close  
Great Bosphorus?

*Queen*

So it was; some god  
Contrived it.

*Darius*

Alas! a great divinity  
Deceived his sense.

*Queen*

The evil end he made  
Is present to the eye.

*Darius*

What befell them  
That you thus lament?

*Queen*

The naval host,  
Destroyed, destroyed the landed host.

*Darius*

Thus all the people spears destroyed.

*Queen*

Thus Sousa groans desolate.

730

*Darius*

Alas! the goodly host! Alas! defenders!

*Queen*

All the Bactrians destroyed, no youth remains.

*Darius*

O woe! the youth of allies gone.

*Queen*

Xerxes

Alone with few they say.

*Darius*

Perished how?

Perished where?

*Queen*

To the joyous bridge

They came, the yoke of continents.

*Darius*

He was saved? Can this be true?

*Queen*

Yes, a clear report without dispute.

*Darius*

Alas! that prophecy was quick to act!

Zeus hurled against my son its lightning-end,

740

While I expected after many years

The gods would make an end; but when a man's

Willing and eager, god joins in. The spring

Of evil's found: my son in ignorance

Discovered it, by youthful pride; who hoped

To check the sacred waters of the Hellespont

By chains, just as if it were a slave. He smoothed

His way, yoking Neptune's flowing Bosphorus

With hammered shackles. Mortal though he was,



By folly thought to conquer all the gods  
And Neptune. Had not my son diseased his sense?  
I fear my labored wealth will fall the prey  
Of conquerors.

750

*Queen*

Wicked men counseled this, furious  
Xerxes learned; saying you acquired wealth  
By spear, while he, in cowardice, played  
The warrior at home, and multiplied  
By nothing his ancestral wealth. So often  
These wicked men reproached him, until he  
Did plot his martial way toward Greece.

*Darius*

So their great, eternal deed is done!  
Never had anyone before made this  
Sousa so empty and so desolate,  
Since Zeus, our Lord, bestowed that honor:  
One man to wield his rod's authority  
Over all of Asia, rich in flocks.  
First was Medus leader of the host;  
Next his son fulfilled the office well,  
Whose reason was the helmsman to his spirit;  
Third was Cyrus, fortunate, whose rule  
Brought peace to all: the Lydian people  
And the Phrygian he acquired,  
And marched his might against Ionia:  
No god resented him, for he was wise;  
And fourth was Cyrus' son, who shamed his country  
And ancestral throne; but Artaphrenes  
(Aided by his guile) and his friends,  
Whose task this was, slew him in his palace.  
After him, I, willing, drew the lot  
To rule, and often led a mighty host;  
But never did I cast so great a woe

760

770

780

Upon my city. Xerxes, my son, as young  
In age as sense, ignored my wisdom. Know  
This well, my comrades old as I, all of us  
Who held these powers, never wrought so many  
Woes.

*Chorus*

To what end, my Lord Darius, dost thou  
Harp on this? How could we, the Persian  
People, fare the best?

*Darius*

If you lead  
No expedition to the land of Greece,  
Not even if the Median host be more;  
For Grecian soil is their own ally.

790

*Chorus*

What dost thou intend by that, "their own ally"?

*Darius*

It starves to death excessive numbers.

*Chorus*

But, be sure, we'll raise a well-equipped  
And chosen host.

*Darius*

But even they, who now  
Remain in Greece, shall find no safe return.

*Chorus*

What? Shall not all the host return  
Across the strait of Helle?

*Darius*

Few of many,  
If the oracles of gods are credited:  
As we gaze at what has passed, no half  
Prophecy succeeds, but either all  
Or none. If we credit them, he leaves

800

Behind, his empty hopes persuading, chosen  
Numbers of his host, who now are stationed  
Where Asopus floods the plain, its rich sap  
Kind to Boeotia; here await them  
The lowest depths of woe to suffer, payment  
For his pride and godless arrogance.

They, invading Greece, felt no awe,  
They did not hesitate to plunder images  
Of gods, and put temples to the torch;  
Altars were no more, and statues, like trees,  
Were uprooted, torn from their bases  
In all confusion. Thus their wickedness  
Shall no less make them suffer:

810

Other woes the future holds in store,  
And still the fount of evils is not quenched,  
It wells up, and overflows: so great will be  
The sacrificial cake of clotted gore  
Made at Plataea by Dorian spear.  
And corpses, piled up like sand, shall witness,  
Mute, even to the century to come,  
Before the eyes of men, that never, being  
Mortal, ought we cast our thoughts too high.  
Insolence, once blossoming, bears  
Its fruit, a tasseled field of doom, from which  
A weeping harvest's reaped, all tears.

820

Behold the punishment of these! remember  
Greece and Athens! lest you disdain  
Your present fortune, and lust after more,  
Squandering great prosperity.  
Zeus is the chastener of overboastful  
Minds, a grievous corrector. Therefore advise  
Him, admonished by reason, to be wise,  
And cease his overboastful temper from  
Sinning against the gods. And you, aged  
Mother of Xerxes, go to the palace;

830

Gather up rich and brilliant cloths, and go  
To meet your son; for he, in grief, has rent  
His embroidered robes to shreds. Gently soothe  
Him with your words: to yours alone he'll listen.  
Now shall I descend to nether gloom.  
Elder counselors, farewell, and though  
In time of troubles, give daily pleasures  
To your soul, as wealth cannot benefit  
The dead.

840

*(The Ghost of Darius descends.)*

*Chorus*

Alas! the woes upon us and the woes  
To come have grieved me hearing them.

*Queen*

O god! how many sorrows move against me!  
But one torment has the deepest fang,  
Hearing that dishonor folds about my son  
Its robes. But I shall go to gather up  
Adornments, and try to meet my son.  
When evils come on those we dearly love,  
Never shall we betray them.

850

*(Exit Queen.)*

*Chorus*

Oh! alas, Oh! what a great and a good life was ours,  
Civilly ordered, as long as the agèd  
Ruler of all,  
Mild, unconquerable king,  
Equal to god,  
Darius ruled the land.—  
Glorious arms we displayed, and the bulwarks of custom  
All they did guide. And returning from battle  
Grief had we none,  
Victors, unburdened of all,  
Happy and glad,  
To home again we came.=

860

For many the cities he sacked never crossing the Halys,  
Nor leaving his hearth in a rush:  
At the mouth of the River Strymon,  
Near Thracian places,  
The islands of Achelous;—

Both cities beyond the Aegean, surrounded by towers, 870  
Obeyed him our lord, and who round  
The broad strait of Helle boasting,  
And recessed Propontis,  
And gateway of Pontus, Bosphor;=

And the isles along the headland washed by sea 880  
Lying close to shore:  
Samos and Chios and Lesbos the olive-planted,  
Paros and Naxos and Mykonos,  
And Tenos the neighbor of Andros.—

And the islands in the midst of sea he ruled: 890  
Ikaros and Lemnos,  
Rhodus and Knidos and cities of Aphrodite,  
Paphos and Solus and Salamis,  
Whose founder's the cause of these sorrows.=

Thus the wealthy and populous lands,  
The Ionian province, he ruled; 900  
And the strength of his helmeted men  
Was unwearied, innumerable allies.  
But now we bear god-routed fortunes,  
Overcome by the blows of the sea.

(*Enter Xerxes alone.*)

*Xerxes*

Oh, hateful this doom, woe is me,  
Wretched alas, without augury. 910  
How savagely swooped the deity.  
What will befall me? I swoon  
Beholding these citizens aged.

Zeus! would that fate had covered me  
With the Persians gone!

*Chorus*

Oh alas, King, for a brave host,  
For the great honor of Persian rule,  
For the ranks of men whom a god has slain. 920

Nations wail their native sons,  
Who by Xerxes stuffed up hell;  
Many heroes, Persia's bloom,  
Archers, thick array of men,  
Myriads have perished.  
Woe, O King of noble strength.  
Cruel! Cruel! Asia kneels. 930

*Xerxes*

Here am I, alas, O woe:  
To my native and ancestral land  
Woe is the evil I've become.

*Chorus*

Loudly shall I send, for your return,  
An evil-omened shout, an evil-practiced cry:  
A weeping wail of Persian mourners shall I sing.—

*Xerxes*

Send a wail of evil sound  
Lamenting and grievous: now  
Fortune again has changed for me. 940

*Chorus*

Mourning wail all-weeping shall I send,  
In honor of your woes and sea-struck grief:  
Again a wailing filled with tears I'll cry.=

*Xerxes*

Ionian Ares spoiled,  
Protected by their ships,  
Their partisan in war, 950

Reaping gloomy flats of sea  
and demon-haunted shores.

*Chorus*

Oh alas!

*Xerxes*

Lament and ask for all.

*Chorus*

But where are the others?  
Where is thy retinue,  
Like Pharandakas,  
Sousas, Pelagon, and Agabatas,  
Dotamas, Psammis, Sousiscanes  
Leaving Agbatana?—

960

*Xerxes*

The lost I deserted there,  
Who from the ships of Tyre  
To Salaminian shore  
Vanished and were gone, their corpses  
pounding stubborn shores.

*Chorus*

Oh alas! but where is Pharnouchus  
And brave Ariomardus?  
Where is Seualkes lord,  
Or Lilaeus grand,  
Memphis, Tharybis, and Masistres,  
Artembares and Hystaechmes?  
These I ask you about.=

970

*Xerxes*

Oh alas, woe,  
Who all, beholding ancient, hateful Athens, gasp on shore,  
Woe upon woe, wretched in a single sweep of oar.

*Chorus*

Did you leave that Persian there,  
Your trusted universal eye,

980

Who made his count by myriads,  
Batanochus' son Alpistus?

. . . . .

Of Sesames, of Megabates,  
Great Parthus and Oebares you left behind?  
O woe, O woe, O miseries.  
You tell of woes on woes.—

*Xerxes*

Oh alas, woe,  
The magic wheel of longing for my friends you turn, you tell  
Me hateful sorrows. Within my frame my heart resounds,  
resounds.

990

*Chorus*

And for the others still we long:  
The leader of ten thousand men  
Of Mardia, Xanthes, Angchares,  
And Diaexis and Arsamas,  
Masters of horsemen,  
And Dadakas and Lythimnas,  
And Tolmus who never slaked his spear.  
I see about the moving tents,  
I see no followers. =

1000

*Xerxes*

Gone are the hunters of the pack.

*Chorus*

Gone, alas, fameless.

*Xerxes*

Oh alas, woe.

*Chorus*

Woe, O gods  
Who brought these unexpected woes!  
How baleful gleams the eye of doom.—

*Xerxes*

Struck by woes perpetual.



*Chorus*

Struck by recent—

*Xerxes*

A recent woe.

1010

*Chorus*

Woe, alas,

They met the men-of-war without success:

How luckless was the Persians' war. =

*Xerxes*

Alas, in so vast an army I am struck.

*Chorus*

What is not lost, thou curse of the Persians?

*Xerxes*

Behold the remnants of my power.

*Chorus*

I see, I see.

*Xerxes*

And this receptacle.

1020

*Chorus*

What is this that is saved?

*Xerxes*

A treasure of arrows.

*Chorus*

How few from so many!

*Xerxes*

We are reft of protectors.

*Chorus*

Greeks stand firm in combat.—

*Xerxes*

Alas, too firm! I scan an unexpected woe.

*Chorus*

You mean the host, routed and broken?

*Xerxes*

My garments I rent at my woe.

*Chorus*

Alas, O woe.

1030

*Xerxes*

And even more than woe.

*Chorus*

Double and triple the woe.

*Xerxes*

Painful to us, but to enemies joy.

*Chorus*

And docked was our power.

*Xerxes*

I am stripped of escorts.

*Chorus*

Sea-dooms stripped us of our friends.=

*Xerxes*

Weep, weep, weep for the woe, and homeward depart.

*Chorus*

Alas, O woe, misery.

*Xerxes*

Shout antiphonal to me.

1040

*Chorus*

To woebegone woeful gift of woes.

*Xerxes*

Raising a cry, join together our songs.

*Xerxes and Chorus*

Alas, O woe, woe, woe upon woe.

*Chorus*

Hearing this calamity,

Oh! I am pierced.—

*Xerxes*

Sweep, sweep, sweep with the oar, and groan for my sake.

*Chorus*

I weep, alas, woe is me.

*Xerxes*

Shout antiphonal to me.

*Chorus*

My duty is here, O master, lord.

*Xerxes*

Lift up your voice in lamenting now.

1050

*Xerxes and Chorus*

Alas, O woe, woe, woe upon woe.

*Chorus*

Black again the blows are mixed,

Oh, with the groans.=

*Xerxes*

Beat your breast and cry Mysian songs.

*Chorus*

Woe upon woe.

*Xerxes*

Tear your whitened hair tightly clenched.

*Chorus*

Tightly clenched, plaintive.

*Xerxes*

Piercing cry.

*Chorus*

And so I shall,—

*Xerxes*

Full-fold garments with strength of hand rend.

1060

*Chorus*

Woe upon woe.

*Xerxes*

Pluck your hair and pity the host.

*Chorus*

Tightly clenched, plaintive.

*Xerxes*

Drench your eyes.

*Chorus*

And so I weep. =

*Xerxes*

Shout antiphonal to me.

*Chorus*

Alas, O woe.

*Xerxes*

Wretched, homeward depart.

*Chorus*

O woe, alas.

1070

*Xerxes*

Through the city lamentation.

*Chorus*

Lament indeed.

*Xerxes*

Softly stepping, moan.

*Chorus*

O Persian land in hardness stepped.

*Xerxes*

O woe, woe, in triple banks of oars,

O woe, woe, in argosies destroyed.

*Chorus*

We shall escort thee

With mournful lament.

(*Exeunt omnes.*)